

Chicago teachers vote to continue strike

Mayor threatens injunction

Joseph Kishore
17 September 2012

A meeting of Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) delegates voted yesterday to continue the strike of 26,000 teachers in the nation's third largest school district. The decision by the approximately 800 teacher-delegates from the various public schools reflects the determined opposition of teachers to the assault on their jobs and on public education in Chicago and throughout the country.

The vote is a major setback for the CTU leadership, which is seeking to quickly push through a contract that accepts all of the major demands of Mayor Rahm Emanuel and the Chicago Public Schools authorities.

Delegates were presented Sunday with highlights of a contract agreed to by the CTU leadership after less than one week on strike. The decision to oppose the leadership is all the more striking given the fact that the House of Delegates is composed of teachers who are generally closer to the union apparatus than the membership as a whole.

In response to the vote of the delegates, CTU President Karen Lewis said the union is planning for another vote by the delegates on the same contract agreement, to be held Tuesday night. No further negotiations are planned.

Emanuel responded to the rebellion by the teachers with a threat of court action. "I will not stand by while the children of Chicago are played as pawns in an internal dispute within a union," the mayor—a Democrat and former chief of staff to President Obama—declared.

Fearful that the strike is spinning out of control of the CTU, Emanuel is preparing open strikebreaking by means of court injunctions and fines to supplement the efforts of the union leadership to betray the teachers' struggle and impose the reactionary bipartisan agenda of so-called school "reform" that is being spearheaded on the national level by the Obama administration.

Emanuel said the strike was illegal on two grounds: that the issues at stake were "non-strikeable" according to state law, and that the walkout "endangers the health and safety of our children." Emanuel's pretense of concern for the well being of the city's children is entirely cynical. He is conducting a ruthless drive to close schools and slash education funding, while turning much of the school system over to charter school profiteers.

The result will be even more overcrowded classrooms for tens of thousands of youth and an environment even more inimical to learning.

Emanuel's threat of court injunctions sheds light on the treacherous calculations of the CTU leadership in calling for a revote by the delegates of the same agreement they refused to back on Sunday. CTU President Karen Lewis and Vice President Jesse Sharkey hope that two more days of media slander and intimidation combined with the threat of fines and jailings will cow the delegates into voting to end the strike on Tuesday.

At the Sunday delegates meeting, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed a statement that was widely read and discussed by the teachers. The statement reviewed the character of the agreement and outlined a political strategy for carrying forward the struggle. (See: "This deal is not what the strike was about!")

Among the most significant concessions included in the contract is the acceptance of an evaluation scheme that expands the use of standardized testing to scapegoat teachers for the crisis in public education. The agreement would immediately raise the test score portion of evaluations to 30 percent, a level that would likely increase in future years. Tenured teachers would have only one year before they could be fired on the basis of these evaluations, while non-tenured teachers could be dismissed immediately.

The contract also accedes to Emanuel's demand that principals have authority over who is hired. This guts recall rights for laid-off teachers, effectively destroying

job security. The aim of Emanuel and the CPS authorities is to drive out older, more experienced and higher paid teachers—particularly those opposed to education “reform.”

The agreement (details of which were released Sunday night) also cuts layoff benefits in half.

Behind these measures are the plans of the city to eviscerate public education through the shutdown of up to 120 public schools over the next five years, combined with the opening of 60 new charter schools run by private companies. Thousands of teachers will be laid off as the public education system is downsized by about one fifth.

Lewis acknowledged at the press conference after the delegates meeting that the shutdown of schools was the “elephant in the room” and a driving force of teacher opposition. However, the CTU president is on record as saying that she “understands the whole movement of closing schools and doing it aggressively,” saying her only wish is to “do this together in some reasonable way.”

The contract was presented Sunday afternoon after the CTU had kept members in the dark about a “framework” that was already agreed on by Thursday. Last week, Lewis said she “prayed” that teachers would be back at work on Monday. She and Sharkey had hoped that they could push through the deal on Sunday before the delegates and rank-and-file members had a chance to examine it.

This proved impossible. At a press conference after the three-hour-long delegates’ meeting, she feigned sympathy with the delegates’ decision, declaring hypocritically, “Why would you make a decision on something that you haven’t had a chance to really look at?”—precisely what she had attempted to get delegates to do.

Lewis also reiterated the union’s acceptance of the entire framework in which the issue of public education is posed by Emanuel and the Obama administration. The contract, she said, is “based on whatever the board has... We all know that the board doesn’t have a lot of money standing around to do what would make us all happy. It is the deal we have.”

The union accepts the claim by both big-business parties that there is no money to pay for decent public education and decent wages and benefits for teachers. In fact, the budget crisis of the states and cities is seen by the political establishment as an opportunity to dismantle public education and other public services and drastically cut the

wages, pensions and health benefits of workers, even as it spends trillions of dollars on bank bailouts and war.

The determination of the CTU to shut down the strike is bound up with its political alliance with the Democratic Party and the Obama administration. The CTU’s parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, was one of the first unions to endorse Obama’s reelection campaign.

This political alliance was on display the day before the delegates meeting, when the CTU called a rally attended by some 10,000 teachers. The CTU provided a platform for top union functionaries, such as American Federation of Teachers Secretary-Treasurer Loretta Johnson, along with political figures in the Democratic Party, such as Jesse Jackson, to make empty declarations of “solidarity” with the teachers’ struggle.

Chicago teachers are showing immense courage in a battle that pits them against the Democratic and Republican Parties as well as the CTU itself. The response of Emanuel makes clear that the political establishment is not backing down, while the actions of the CTU over the past week demonstrate its political bankruptcy. For the strike to be carried forward, it must be taken out of the hands of the CTU through the formation of rank-and-file teachers’ committees.

The fight to defend teachers and public education must be carried forward on a new basis—not through appeals to the Democrats and their corporate backers, but through a struggle to mobilize the entire working class. Threats of injunctions and legal action must be met with a call for general strike action and a united political offensive of workers against Emanuel, the Obama administration and the entire corporate-controlled two-party system.

It is necessary to advance a socialist program, based on the nationalization of the banks and major corporations under the democratic control of the working people, in order to marshal the resources needed to provide quality public education for all.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact